

DIVERSITY NEWS

May 2008

Yvonne: In April 2008, the Society for Human Resource Management convened its first Leadership Summit on Diversity and Inclusion.

More than 100 diversity and inclusion experts from around the world came together to explore strategies for advancing the profession—and to identify the competencies, skills, and tools needed to be effective leaders and practitioners.

Thomas: At that summit, Susan Meisinger, the president and CEO of the Society for Human Resource Management, said that among the challenges facing diversity and inclusion professionals is the lack of clarity as to what diversity and diversity management mean.

She also pointed out that diversity and inclusion practices often lag behind advances in diversity theory. In short, she said, the field has not progressed as many had hoped.

Yvonne: Over the past few years, that sense of being “stuck” has been a recurring theme in diversity and inclusion literature.

In this edition of Diversity News, we’ll take a look at some possible sources of that feeling, and we’ll talk about ways to overcome it.

For more than 20 years, Dr. R. Roosevelt Thomas, Jr., has been at the forefront of developing and implementing innovative concepts and strategies for maximizing organizational and individual potential through diversity management.

In 1984, concerned about the inability of America’s organizations to maximize the contribution of diverse employees, Dr. Thomas founded the American Institute for Managing Diversity, a nonprofit think tank devoted to advancing the field of diversity management. He has also authored several books on the subject:

“Beyond Race and Gender: Unleashing the Power of Your Total Work Force by Managing Diversity.”

“Redefining Diversity.”

“Building a House for Diversity: A Fable about a Giraffe and an Elephant offers New Strategies for Today’s Workforce.”

And “Building on the Promise of Diversity: How We Can Move to the Next Level in Our Workplaces, Our Communities, and Our Society.”

In his book, “Building on the Promise of Diversity,” Dr. Thomas addresses the current status of the diversity field (which, in his words, is “just plain stuck”). He also describes

some of the reasons behind this “stuckness,” and he identifies the steps that must be taken in order to move beyond it.

Thomas: According to Dr. Thomas, America is “an experiment in diversity.” And in order for this experiment to be successful, five conditions must exist:

First, we must have consensus about the ideals and values that bind us. The greater this consensus, the easier it is to create an environment that works for all.

Second, we must assimilate willingly around these consensus ideals and values.

Third, we must understand that Americans are defined by their commitment to these ideals and values, not by their ethnic heritage.

Fourth, we must be open to change and willing to explore, continually and carefully, the appropriateness of existing values and ideals.

And fifth, we must possess the ability to manage diversity. That is, we must master the craft of making quality decisions amid the inevitable differences, similarities, and related tensions that result from welcoming all people and allowing ethnic groups to retain their character.

Dr. Thomas is dismayed to report that none of these conditions necessary for the American Experiment’s success is currently being met. He does, however, offer several suggestions for implementing what he refers to as “the multicultural option”:

Civic leaders must engage in meaningful, informative, and even inspiring dialogue at national, state, and local levels to instill in the American people a deep appreciation of the American Experiment’s history and nature, and an awareness of alternatives to it.

Civic leaders must help citizens to understand and affirm the conditions for the success of the American Experiment and their implications. For example, by emphasizing that conscious, deliberate, persistent effort is required.

Civic leaders must support the development of diversity management capability. Collective and individual mastery of the craft of making quality decisions in the midst of diversity is an absolute must.

Civic leaders and individual citizens must refuse to be discouraged by the back-and-forth, up-and-down fluctuations that come with efforts to implement the American Experiment. We must remember that our country, our culture, and our collective mastery of the craft of diversity management are works in progress.

Yvonne: According to Dr. Thomas, if we are to fully understand diversity and diversity management, and take advantage of their powerful capacity for change, we must separate them from the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement.

Dr. Thomas writes that he regularly encounters people who confuse diversity with civil rights, and this confusion makes it difficult for them to embrace diversity and diversity management in their fullest sense.

This confusion is evident, he says, wherever people equate diversity with:

An extension of the Civil Rights Movement,

The pursuit of racial and social justice,

Affirmative action and racial desegregation,

Something that involves race and gender,

Or a concept in which White males have no role.

According to Dr. Thomas, these misperceptions make it difficult for people to learn the craft of diversity management, which means they are missing out on the enormous potential it offers in a multitude of arenas—including the civil rights agenda.

Dr. Thomas has several suggestions for leaders who desire to bring about progress, whether at the local, state, or national level, or in organizations:

Engage in and encourage dialogue about the Civil Rights Movement and the ultimate goal of desegregation: the integrated community or organization. (Which is often referred to as “the Beloved Community.”)

Gain an operational understanding of “the Beloved Community,” what is required to achieve it, and what the implications of its achievement would be.

Seek conceptual and operational clarity about diversity and diversity management. And how these concepts differ from those associated with the Civil Rights Movement and the Beloved Community.

Communicate understandings, conclusions, and aspirations about the Civil Rights Movement and about diversity management throughout the community or organization.

And take the necessary steps to master the craft of diversity management, as a community or as an organization.

Thomas: Similar to the confusion between the concepts of diversity and civil rights, is the confusion between diversity and affirmative action.

In contrast to the Civil Rights Movement's emphasis on color blindness, desegregation, and individual rights, affirmative action focuses on color consciousness, integration, and group representation.

As Dr. Thomas sees it, affirmative action was created principally because America's institutions were not ready for diversity.

According to Dr. Thomas, as a society we are still not ready, partly because affirmative action has allowed us to ignore our inability to address diversity effectively.

Dr. Thomas's prescription is to "remodel" organizations and society, so that they anticipate—and are prepared for—all kinds of diversity.

To do this, individuals, organizations, and communities must develop a diversity management capability. That is, the ability to make quality decisions in situations that have differences, similarities, and tensions—including those related to race, gender, and ethnicity.

Dr Thomas recommends taking these action steps:

Affirm your organization's commitment to racial and ethnic representation.

Work to de-politicize affirmative action within your organization.

Secure commitment to developing an "exit strategy" from affirmative action.

Legitimize the dialogue on affirmative action, since a democratic and pluralistic country **REQUIRES** the proportional economic participation and inclusion of all groups.

Develop race-neutral, gender-neutral, and ethnic-neutral people processes for attracting, selecting, and retaining a representative workforce.

And build a collective and individual diversity management capability.

The ability to recognize, analyze, and respond appropriately to diversity mixtures—and the wisdom and judgment necessary for using the skills effectively—are essential for developing an environment that fully engages a representative and behaviorally diverse workforce.

Yvonne: According to Dr. Thomas, the diversity field's inability to move past the point of being "stuck" is related to the narrowness of its focus.

Dr. Thomas identifies several factors that keep diversity managers stuck:

Workforce diversity initiatives have been politicized, since they are viewed as an extension or outgrowth of the Civil Rights Movement.

Diversity managers are uncomfortable with diversity tensions, which persist in spite of efforts to eliminate racism, sexism, and other “isms.”

Diversity advocates often believe that progress with desegregation has been inadequate.

Even a “stuck” organization can do quality work in the diversity field, focusing on representation and relationships.

Society doesn’t distinguish between “effort” and “achievement” when it comes to diversity.

Organizations emulate companies that are stuck. (For example, through benchmarking and “best practices.”)

Many leaders believe that no new solutions are needed. All that is necessary, they think, is the will to act.

Some senior executives think being stuck is the “state of the art.” To them, this is as good as it gets.

Many leaders are reluctant to admit that they need help.

Vague objectives and definitions of success make it difficult to measure progress.

Concepts and processes are confused. For example, terms such as diversity, diversity management, equal opportunity, and affirmative action are used interchangeably, as if there were equivalent.

And managers have difficulty subscribing simultaneously to two or more approaches to diversity.

To become “unstuck,” organizations and their leaders must meet several conditions. They must adopt a new frame of reference that embraces these concepts:

Multiple perspectives of diversity.

An alternative decision-making framework.

Capability and empowerment instead of ready-made solutions.

Universality of application, to move beyond “silo” approaches to diversity.

Accommodation of diversity tension.

Multiple causation of poor decision making in the face of diversity.

A focus on individuals, as well as organizations.

Visible ownership at all levels.

And a framework that clearly delineates the concepts, principles, and skills that are needed.

Thomas: Dr. Thomas describes five fundamental understandings that promote effectiveness in mastering the craft of strategic diversity management.

The first is that a shared understanding of core diversity concepts must be established. The core concepts that Dr. Thomas identifies are diversity, strategic diversity management, diversity tensions, being diversity challenged, and being diversity capable.

Dr. Thomas defines diversity as “the mix of differences, similarities, and tensions that can exist among the elements of a collective mixture.”

Dr. Thomas defines strategic diversity management as “a craft for enhancing the way people make quality decisions in situations where there are critical differences, similarities, and tensions.”

Dr. Thomas defines diversity tension as “the stress, strain, and anxiety that tend to flow from the interaction of differences and similarities.” It is a natural accompaniment of diversity.

To be “diversity challenged,” says Dr. Thomas, is to have difficulty making quality decisions when differences, similarities, and tensions exist. It doesn’t mean you’re a bad person, it just means that you are unable to make good decisions in the midst of diversity.

Being “diversity capable” on the other hand, means mastering the craft of making quality decisions in spite of differences, similarities, and related tensions.

In addition to establishing a shared understanding of core diversity concepts, other fundamental understandings that promote effectiveness in mastering the craft of strategic diversity management include:

The idea that context is key. Diversity efforts are never conducted in a vacuum. They are shaped and affected by the external environment and the organization’s mission, vision, and strategy.

Diversity efforts must be requirements driven. That is, they must focus on what is absolutely necessary to accomplish the individual's or organization's mission, vision, and strategy.

Diversity aspirations of individuals as well as their organizations must be considered, since the aspirations of individuals can impact the effectiveness of an organization's diversity efforts.

And organizations and individuals must apply strategic diversity management universally. That is, to manage diversity effectively, organizations and individuals must apply the craft of strategic diversity management to whatever mixture is critical.

According to Dr. Thomas, strategic diversity management does not necessarily remove or minimize the causes of diversity tension, such as racism and sexism. What it will do is help individuals and organizations function better in spite of that tension.

Yvonne: In future editions of Diversity News, we'll be looking at developing skills related to strategic diversity management.

But that's all we have time for in this edition of Diversity News. We appreciate your watching and we hope you'll tune in again next month.

Thomas: Until then, for more frequent updates of diversity news, sign up for our free weekly e-mail news service: NewsLink. Just send an e-mail message to the address shown below, with the words "subscribe news" in the subject line.

Yvonne: And check out our bimonthly newsletter, Diversity@Work, available as a download on our Web site or by e-mail from our office.

Also, we want to hear from you! If you'd like to share your story ideas, comments, or suggestions, please e-mail us at dmeeo@va.gov with the words "Diversity News" in the subject line.

Until next time...

Both: Have a great month!